Yishuv Haolam: The Jewish Imperative of Sustainability

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin and Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner

Over the past fifty years, despite an increased interest in a Jewish approach to environmental ethics, no language of mitzvah (commandment) has emerged that captures the full, all-encompassing, and urgent nature of the challenge of sustainability that the world currently faces. Though it is clearly true that Judaism speaks of earth as God's creation and possession, this general perception appears not to be presented as a command. In a religion that is so exquisitely designed to translate values into commandments, this absence is curious.

Upon further exploration, though, we believe that the mitzvah we have been seeking has been there all the while, hiding in plain sight—the commandment of *yishuv haolam* (from the Hebrew root *y-sh-v*), the Jewish imperative of maintaining a livable, thriving, and flourishing world. *Sefer HaChinuch,* written by the itinerant Spanish preacher Pinchas ben Joseph haLevi of Barcelona, expands on the first mitzvah in the Torah, "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), as follows:

> The roots of this mitzvah [come to teach us] that the world is designed to be inhabited (*y-sh-v)* for the Holy One wishes it to be inhabited (*y-sh-v*), as it says (Isaiah 45:18): "God did not create the world [intending that it be] chaos (*tohu*); God created it for habitation (*y-sh-v*)." It is a premier mitzvah by virtue of which all mitzvot in the world stand.

This passage declares that the very first mitzvah, “be fruitful and multiply,” encompasses a grander overarching imperative: the very purpose of Creation was to establish——and, therefore, not to extinguish——a thriving world. That was God’s own desire and purpose.

In his call, Isaiah offers a midrash on Genesis: At the moment of Creation, we are told that the world was *tohu vavohu* (“chaos and without form,” Genesis 1:2), but *tohu vavohu*, says Isaiah, was not a state of being that God wanted to perpetuate. Creation itself was an expression of God’s rejection of chaos and an embrace of a habitable world. According to *Sefer HaChinuch*, the fact that God created the world for habitation grounds the whole enterprise of Torah. God was seeking a thriving world for human habitation, which must necessarily include concern for the physical well-being of this world.

This was not an original insight by the author of *Sefer HaChinuch*, but rather a reflection on a very old rabbinic reading of Isaiah. It first appears as a midrash on Isaiah in Mishnah Eduyot 1.13 in a discussion between the schools of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel in the first half of the first century, when the Temple was still standing. In *B’reishit Rabbah* 13:1, Rabbi Chanina calls God’s creation of vegetation a step God takes to make the world habitable (*y-sh-v*). In the Talmud, rainfall is likewise described as a part of God’s creation which was created for the right order and habitability (*y-sh-v*)[1] of the world.

In 15th century Spain, the Biblical commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel recognized that this idea of *yishuv haolam* led to a fuller understanding of two

somewhat unusually specific mitzvot. In his commentary to Deuteronomy 22:6, Abarbanel compares the mitzvah of this verse——send away a mother bird and refrain from taking her eggs in her presence——to that of not destroying fruit-bearing trees during a siege. The first mitzvah is standardly interpreted as evidencing a concern for the mother's maternal feelings. Abarbanel acknowledges this interpretation, but further expands its teaching by comparing it to the second mitzvah:

> The Torah intended by this … that existence should continue to exist… as (in the case of) the fruit-bearing tree. The Holy One commanded us not to destroy that which gives birth or produces fruit. Rather, just as it is permitted to pick fruit but forbidden to cut down the tree... so He commanded that we take the children, who are the fruit, … but send away the mother… so the mother should produce other fruit and existence will be sustained and improved…. That is why the end of the verse is 'so that it may be good for you and so that you may live long [upon the earth]'… [I]t is good for humankind for existence to be sustained.

The Spanish kabbalist Joseph ben Abraham ibn Gikatilla, contemporaneous with *Sefer HaChinuch*, also wrote about *yishuv haolam*. He pens this passage about our obligation to care for the world:

> One who enjoys the world but does not engage in its maintenance (*y-sh-v*) is likened to what? To one to whom the king gave a beautiful garden and who was instructed to maintain it and enjoy its fruits… For God gave God's world to humankind just like the king who placed the garden in the hands of a caretaker…

> Every person who eats and drinks and benefits from the world, but only attends to their own benefit and enjoyment, such a person destroys the world and is liable to the sovereign.

We may only enjoy the benefits of this world when we actively sustain its existence; otherwise we are complicit in and liable for its destruction.

In the words of Eliezer Waldenberg of Jerusalem: “This mitzvah of settlement of the world is a general mitzvah. [It] is obligatory on everyone to make efforts to assure that the world be made habitable (*y-sh-v*).” The fact that we have not fully stepped up to this mitzvah of sustaining the habitability of the world is the failure we must now strive to rectify. In reading “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and conquer it” (Genesis 1:28), we have too often taken our commandment to conquer the world as an unlimited right, not taking into consideration the obligations implicit in Genesis Two that humankind’s mission is to “work it and watch over it” (Genesis 2:15). It is ultimately this latter requirement that is most consistent with the current demands of the mitzvah of *yishuv haolam*.

Generations of readers have noted that Genesis One and Genesis Two offer differing accounts of Creation. Perhaps no difference is more consequential to the issue we are exploring than the tasks that God assigned to *adam*—humanity. In Genesis One, all life is designed to be self-renewing. Each life is born with seeds within it that hold the promise of the next generation. In the words of Nachmanides: “God created species in the world… giving them the power to give birth so that those species should continue forever, as long as God wished the world to continue.” This movement from chaos to continuity is the message of sustainability in Genesis One. Into this world of sustained

life, God created the humans and blessed them saying: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and tame it; hold sway over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and over every animal that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:27-28).

We need not balk, wonder at, or apologize for this blessing of mastery and dominance.. Humanity, here, was in its infancy: weak, few, and naïve. Our footprint was small and our vulnerability great. The ingenuity and technology that would be the hallmarks of our species and the birthing ground of civilization had yet to fully emerge. In Genesis One, humankind was blessed with the innate capacity, even the mandate, to explore, push boundaries, be curious, experiment, and use all the gifts of inspiration with which we were endowed to survive and thrive in this God-given world. It was unimaginable that earth’s riches could be consumed into extinction. Earth was seen as an unending panoply of resources for our benefit and use. Our job was to flourish in a divinely-constructed, eternally self-regenerating world. We believed there was nothing we could do to upset the earth’s eternal systems. Flourishing and thriving was our primary task. So for thousands of years, we focused on just that. We tamed the rivers and felled the trees; we distilled potions from the plants to reduce our fevers and ease our pains; we built cities, roads and museums; we planted and harvested and gathered in, changing the land, flora and watercourses as we went. We were fruitful and multiplied, and burst the bounds of God’s blessing. For generations we have lived into those blessings.

Such a vision of Creation and our human role in it only made sense before all our impacts on the earth reached catastrophic heights. Although we are still at the mercy of nature’s power (storms, illness, earthquakes, viruses and infections), collectively we are

not few, not insignificant, and not innocent. Our footprint is larger than it ever was. Over the last 150 years we have profoundly altered the contours of earth and the components of the world's operating systems in ways that are irreparable in any meaningful human timeframe. As such, humanity's purpose must now be to place our capacities in service to the whole. Such is the task we are created for in Genesis Two.

Genesis Two expands the narrow, short-term, and human-centered cost-benefit analysis of human goals and efforts found in Genesis One to include the non-human sphere in the larger ecosystem, as well as the longer term encompassing future generations. While Genesis One is anthropocentric and inward-facing, Genesis Two is eco-centric and outward-facing, embedding human behavior within and responsive to earth's complex operating system. Our job in Genesis Two is not to consume and subdue the world's goodness, but to bring the earth into its own full fecundity and manage its richness and resources wisely.

The goal of both creation stories is the thriving of humankind. But in the first we thrive to the ultimate detriment of the super-abundant earth and in the second we thrive only in partnership with it. In contrast to Genesis One's message of the earth being created for us, Genesis Two teaches that we were created for the sake of the earth. Humanity and earth are a dyad, mutually reinforcing the well-being of each other and all the creatures who depend upon Creation. Such an interpretation yields not just a different literary reading, but a different theological charge.

Whereas in Genesis One, the bounty of the earth predates the arrival of humans, laid out as a smorgasbord, a *shulchan aruch* (traditional Jewish legal guide) for our use

and hegemony, in Genesis Two the bounty of the earth awaits the contributions of humanity, whose presence is necessary for the fulfillment of earthly goodness.

We know today, given the sheer numbers of humanity, that we are no longer the unconditional beneficiaries of the earth's pre-existing bounty but must be its nurturers and co-creators. We are not the sovereigns we seem to be in Genesis One, but God's—and Earth's—partners in bringing out the best creation Creation can offer.

For most of human existence, our small violations were tolerated. Humanity and the earth functioned well under a Genesis One worldview. While we did occasionally mistreat the earth, the breadth of our impact was limited. If we harmed the earth, we moved on; and in time, the earth recovered from our indiscretions.

Relatively recently, we have learned that humanity can no longer afford to live with a Genesis One mentality. We are too big, too powerful, too consequential for that. Our impact is global; there is no other place for us to go. This earth is all we have. In response to the earth's struggles to endure and absorb all our indiscretions, we must embrace the ideology of Genesis Two. We must come to terms with the geophysical powers we wield and develop an ethic that can honor, restrain, and guide those powers so we and future generations of all species can live in a healthy, regenerative world. This calls us to the mitzvah of *yishuv haolam*, acting to ensure the habitability of the world, as Genesis Two would encourage us to define it.

A Genesis Two model argues for an eco-centric systems approach. We cannot ignore other forms of life or the interplay of environmental components. Nor can we ignore "externalities," the unintended consequences of human behavior that harm creation (and ultimately us as well). Genesis Two teaches us that we are responsible

for what we do, and in order to pursue our own survival we must also pursue the betterment of all. For it is only through the betterment of all that we, too, flourish.

This is not to say there is no “destruction” in the Genesis Two model. All life leaves a trace. We must cut trees to build shelters, work the soil to grow food, mine the earth for stone and ore. Predators eat prey; ruminants eat plants. Consumption implies some measure of destruction, but when the traces we leave today are minimal enough to allow the earth to meet the needs of tomorrow, then it is regenerative destruction.

We all use earth’s gifts. Our challenge is to use them in a fashion that allows their renewal, preservation, and reuse in an endlessly cyclical fashion. For as the earth knows no waste, neither should we. The human must be what we were called to be in Eden, the global “g[u]ardener” ——the one who creates an enduring world out of our engagement with all its riches, all the while replenishing it for those yet to come.